

Environment, Health, and Safety Excellence

Remarks by John Howard to the
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Waste Management Conference and Exhibition
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Thank you. This is my first time to attend the Department of Defense's P2 conference, and it has lived up to its great reputation. It's an honor to be here with you and with the distinguished set of speakers from throughout the Department of Defense.

The American people have high expectations for the federal government, more now than in many years, to fulfill each of our department's and agency's missions. To do that, we must be focused, we have to prioritize, we must be proactive, and we need creativity. Today, I'd like to talk about our – the federal government's, the Department of Defense's, and your – commitment to – and our expectations of – excellence in environment, health, and safety and how that will help you achieve your mission of operational readiness.

Incredible Progress

We live in an incredible time in our nation's and the world's history. Each of us faces tall mountains of issues and problems that we're expected to climb, daily. Too frequently, though, we fail to remember that we already have scaled similar mountains.

We have made significant environmental progress over the last 30 years. Today, we know that environmental improvement and economic prosperity go hand in hand. EPA recently released a first-ever report pulling together numbers from throughout the federal agencies, states, and nonprofit organizations to give us the most comprehensive view to date of our environmental picture. For example, since 1970, our economy has grown 150 percent. During that time, emissions of key air pollutants have decreased 25 percent.

Since 1988 (and the inception of the Toxic Release Inventory program), releases of 300 toxic chemicals have been cut nearly in half (48 percent). Today, 94 percent of public drinking water systems are safe, up from less than 80 percent just a decade ago. Since 1970, our energy use has grown at only one-fifth of our economic growth, and renewable energy generation has increased 30 percent. And a measure that should be included more frequently in environmental discussions but isn't, our health is improving – life expectancy is a record 77.2 years, our national mortality and infant mortality rates are at all-time lows, and cancer and heart disease mortality continue to fall.

And yet we still face many environmental challenges – and these challenges are part of, not separate from, our central mission.

Commitment to EH&S Excellence

Every day, federal employees are called upon to meet these many challenges and to fulfill important missions. The American people expect great things from each of us, and we thank you for your public service.

In doing our job, we each have the opportunity, and the responsibility, to lead by example, to be a good steward of the resources we have been entrusted with, and to be a good neighbor in our communities.

Maintaining mission readiness includes meeting our environmental challenges proactively and effectively. An important part of every federal agency's mission and every federal employee's job is to ensure a healthy environment and a healthy and safe workplace. We know that failing to meet our environmental, health and safety responsibilities can prevent us from maintaining readiness. Just as importantly, achieving environmental, health, and safety excellence can help us more effectively fulfill our mission.

As President Bush said recently regarding some children's reading programs: "They're working okay. We want better than okay in America. We want excellence."

So what does it really mean to meet each of these objectives, and what do we expect of the Department and you?

Leading by Example

We all – as individuals, services, and departments, and as the federal government – should lead by example. To meet this commitment, it has to become part of your job – and frequently that means making it personal.

I've now had the privilege of working for President Bush for nearly seven years, working for him in Austin just up the road. I have seen his commitment to improving our quality of life, a strong focus on performance and actually getting better results, a willingness to encourage innovation, and a personal ethic of stewardship.

He made sure that the Texas Governor's Mansion was one of the first facilities to participate in the City of Austin's renewable energy program. His ranch has many sustainable design features, including a geothermal heating and cooling system, a rainwater cistern, native plants – even a propane-powered pickup truck. And the White House recently installed its first-ever solar electric system.

The Department of Defense is the world's leading military might – and has recognized that to maintain that status, it must also achieve excellence in environmental, health, and safety performance. To lead by example in the environmental, health and safety realm, we have four principles to follow, each of which applies to you and your work:

1. Conduct our work with respect and care for life and the environment.

This is simply a component of the military's primary mission of defending and protecting lives and extends into each military installation and operation, at home and abroad. You do long-range planning better than nearly anyone else in the world because you know you're going to be there – and to be there 50 years from now, you have to take care of your people, resources, and communities now.

2. Comply with all applicable environmental, natural resource, safety, and health laws and requirements.

As a bare minimum, we have to comply with the laws on the books. From the President and the Cabinet secretaries to all those in the field, we know we need to do this. I want to thank all of you, and particularly John Paul Woodley, Asst Dep Under Sec for ES&OH, for all your work to improve DoD's compliance record and promote excellence.

In fact, from just January to June 2003, the number of DoD facilities EPA identified with "significant environmental non-compliance" dropped by one-third. This becomes all the more important as you work with your neighbors on encroachment issues, and as this Administration focuses on improving performance and using scorecards to measure how everyone is doing.

To help with this effort, we are working with the President's Management Council, the White House Council on Environmental Quality, and the Office of Management and Budget to survey agencies' compliance and compliance management. The surveys are due shortly, and we'll soon be reviewing them to see how we're doing. We hope to highlight the best of these as models for others, and then make some recommendations for the rest to make improvements.

3. Adhere to the highest standards for the safe and efficient operation of facilities and the protection of the environment, employees, and our neighbors.

Compliance is not enough. Compliance is not efficiency or effectiveness or excellence.

Compliance is not integrated with mission. We need to be proactive and identify opportunities for improvements and adhere to the highest standards before they become requirements and impact our ability to achieve our mission.

4. Use modern management systems and other tools to plan, implement, measure, assess, and continually improve our practices.

I'm a big believer in the use of management systems. Around the world in the private sector – and increasingly within the federal government – we're seeing facilities and operations cutting their environmental costs, improving productivity, reducing potential liabilities, reducing noncompliance problems, finding innovative ways to do their job better, and managing issues for the short and long-term. The best benefit to me, though, is that, by bringing together, maybe for the first time, people from different areas within a facility or operation – environment, health and safety, energy, transportation, housing, facilities, budget, legal – and working together, you're going to start seeing some creativity and real improvements. Mr. Woodley will talk more about this shortly. I'm proud and you should be, too, of DOD's leadership and early and strong commitment to developing and using EMSs. To date, 20 military facilities already have EMSs. In the Southeast, in partnership with EPA, states, and universities, 31 military installations are training and developing EMSs right now. And the Army recently issued a guide for commanders on EMS that does a great job of describing how using an EMS can help installations proactively sustain operational readiness and prepare for future challenges. I hope you will continue this leadership and will share your experiences with other federal agencies.

Being a good steward

In addition to leading by example, we also should be good stewards of the resources we have been given. We should follow four basic rules here, too:

1. Achieve our mission without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their resource needs -- and to meet their mission.

This is a version of the often-cited 1987 United Nations Brundtland Commission's definition of sustainability. As noted earlier, America's military is going to be around in the future. To ensure that we're as strong then as we are now, we have to take care of our people, our resources, and our communities. 2. Prevent workplace injuries, occupational illnesses, and environmental incidents.

Our most significant asset is our people. If they're not safe or healthy, they can't do their job and we can't fulfill our mission. And we can't just wait for problems to arise -- we have to actively prevent them.

3. Prevent waste generation and emissions, reuse and recycle materials, handle and dispose of waste safely and responsibly, and excel in the efficient use of energy and water and the conservation of natural resources.

We need to be just as proactive with our resources as we are with our people. Some of my favorite posters are those from World War II calling on Americans to save all their scrap materials so they could be used for making war items -- tanks, trucks, tires, and bullets. With more resources available and economic times a bit better than during World War II, today we tend to forget just how ingenious we can be -- and how much time, energy, materials, and costs we can save when we put our mind to it.

4. Actively improve the environmental profile of the products and services we purchase, taking into consideration life cycle costs and environmental impacts.

As some in DC occasionally remind others, DoD is just about 75% of everything in the federal government -- energy usage, people, buildings, vehicles, budget, and procurement. We should not limit our view of stewardship to just what we make or do, but also should recognize our opportunity to improve the products & services that come into our facilities every day -- thus making our jobs all the easier before we even start. And with this incredible buying power also comes the opportunity to help catalyze the green purchasing market for others and reduce our environmental footprint.

The best part of my job is learning about the great things that are going on within the federal government. The Department has several examples where improved environmental stewardship is being matched with sustained readiness. In the Navy, Mary Wenzel was charged with designing a new class of ships. She knew of the myriad of different and stringent environmental, health, and safety requirements imposed by different countries. Her goal was to design the ship class to be able to operate throughout the world unhindered by these requirements. Using a life cycle and management systems approach, the new class of ships will dramatically reduce environmental, health, and safety impacts. She won a White House Closing the Circle Award in 2002 for her great work.

In early 2001, the Defense Supply Board issued a report describing how fuel impacts the military's readiness. In response, the military is taking several steps to reduce its use of fuels and find new fuel supplies. For example, in Aberdeen, Maryland, they are testing hybrid Humvees, which will be able to drive further on the same gallon of diesel, can operate in "stealth" mode using the battery, and can serve as a power source so that the vehicle does not need to pull a generator. And those drones – the unmanned aerial vehicles we heard about and saw during the recent situations in Afghanistan and Iraq – will soon be powered by fuel cells.

And you have the chance to make these kind of differences with all that you buy and use.

Being a good neighbor

It's important to lead by example and to use our resources wisely. To fulfill our mission, we can't just look inward, though. We also have to be a good neighbor – in our hometowns and with others within the federal community.

DoD is a leader in so many areas. We need to continue to find opportunities to share those experiences, lessons learned, and best practices with others – to break out of our silos. And the federal government has an obligation to its neighbors and citizens to engage them in a dialogue to address encroachment and other community issues.

Being a good neighbor was a lot easier 50 or even 10 years ago than it is today with communities right up to the fence line of more and more federal facilities. We need those federal facilities and the operations and training that they support, and there are very few, if any, alternatives. So the answer has to be to work more and more effectively with the community.

So we should follow three guides: 1. Build partnerships with others within and outside the federal government.

2. Seek innovative solutions by working with our communities, state governments, and others.

I recently had the chance to visit the Richmond Defense Supply Center. They have a Superfund site and are spending a lot of time and energy working with the surrounding community. Because of this situation and the innovative leadership of the facility, they are now partnering with the City of Richmond, the county, and the State of Virginia to develop an environmental management system for the Center AND they're addressing joint regional issues together.

And I recently learned about Camp Butler – which covers several installations in the Pacific islands – and how they're now working on an EMS with EPA AND the Canadian government.

3. Regularly communicate with our neighbors and the public on our operations and progress.

We tend not to recall those times when open communication prevented misunderstanding, but we certainly remember when our failure to provide information resulted in a flap in the paper or on the evening news. With the military, you have additional national security considerations in communications decision. But the need to communicate more with neighbors, given the range of encroachment issues, is critical today.

Conclusion

Maintaining this set of commitments to excellence is a tall order, and it's a responsibility we all share – each federal employee, contractor, and person who works with the federal government.

We want you to perform better and more effectively. We will continue to issue performance scorecards, offer awards to best performers, and share lessons learned and best practices. We want you to succeed.

Congratulations for the significant work you have already done, keep working hard -- and smarter – and I look forward to working with you as we all strive to achieve environmental, health, and safety excellence.